

Professional curiosity in adult safeguarding

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What we will do together today

We will explore -

- What is professional curiosity?
- What are professionally curious behaviours?
- Why be professionally curious?
- What can get in the way?
- How to be as professionally curious as you can!
- Use SARs as illustrative examples.

What will help us

- We will work together in the spirit of professional curiosity.
- Keep analysing, checking things out, asking questions, responding, noticing themes, incongruities, reflect and think of examples from your own area or experience.
- Create a positive learning environment.
- Use the chat bar to ask questions or comment.



What is professional curiosity?

Put in the chat bar

- What is professional curiosity? What does the term mean to you?



A short history of professional curiosity.

- The term 'respectful uncertainty' was used by Lord Laming (2000) in the Victoria Climbié inquiry.
- Munro (2011) Review of Child Protection talks about "curiosity"
- Serious Case Reviews and Safeguarding Adult Reviews take up the term. 44% of SARs in the 2024 national audit found 'a lack of professional curiosity'

A set of skills
and attitudes.

Most common definition:

‘the capacity and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening within a family rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value’



There is a risk of the approach being diluted– it is not just a skill or capability, it is not just about having conversations.



Risk of blame – is it a lack of individual curiosity or a lack of a curious culture in the organisation?

Professional curiosity

- A personality trait or attitude?
- A state of mind?
- An organisational culture?
- A set of skills and behaviours?
- Or all of these things?



Personality traits and attitude.

People -

- who seek out and enjoy acquiring knowledge.
- who can tolerate anxiety and uncertainty.
- who can express positive emotion.
- can use humour and warmth to build relationships.
- enjoy unconventional thinking and new ideas.
- are not defensive and have non-critical attitudes.
- enjoy and are interested in stories.

A state of mind.

- A way of professional practiceor even a way of life.
- Professional curiosity permeates all aspects of a practitioner's interactions and thinking.



A curious organisational culture.

- Values and working practices that make it likely that professional curiosity will thrive.
- An organisation that makes sure that there is time to build relationships (with individuals/families and with partner organisations).
- The outcomes of development opportunities are followed up.
- Encourages reflective supervision and time for team reflection and analysis.
- Managers and leaders model professional curiosity.
- Encourage curiosity as part of a strengths-based approach.
- Recording forms encourage reflection and analysis, not just data gathering.
- Open culture – not reactive or defensive.

Supervision

- Play 'devil's advocate'. Present alternative hypotheses about what could be happening.
- Present cases from the perspective of other family members or professionals.
- Ask practitioners what led them to arrive at their conclusion and support them to think through the evidence.
- Question whether outcomes have improved for the person and evidence for this.
- Provide opportunities for group supervision which can help stimulate debate and curious questioning. Allow practitioners to learn from one another's experiences. A 'fresh pair of eyes' looking at a case can help practitioners and organisations to maintain a clear focus on good practice and risk assessment and develop a critical mindset.
- Monitor workloads and encourage practitioners to talk about and support them to address issues of stress or pressure. Support practitioners to recognise when they are tired and need a fresh pair of eyes on a case.



From SARs

- May – Herefordshire SAB
- Sam and Ben – Rotherham SAB
- Helen and John – Somerset SAB

SAR May – 2019: how we listen.

- For four years before her death May lived alone in a rented one bedroomed flat which can be described as extremely ‘spartan’ with no bed, little furniture or food on the premises, she did not use heating or cooking facilities and had no TV or phone. May spent most of the day outside and often walked six to eight miles per day. Before gaining a tenancy May had lived in a ‘house of multiple occupation’. She spoke fondly about aspects of her furnished room in the house. She did not have to worry about bills as the rent was all inclusive, she had a bed and there was a warm fire. She did not like her flat and said that it did not suit her lifestyle. May was admitted to hospital with hypothermia.....

What does a professionally curious practitioner do?

- Knows how to create **collaborative relationships** with individuals, families and partner organisations.
- Uses **partnership** working.
- Seeks out **knowledge** and understanding – including legal literacy.
- Is **self-aware**, has an awareness of personal biases and the impact of these.
- Is **observant, listens, analyses**. Spots themes, incongruities, strengths, emotion.
- Knows how to have **difficult conversations**.
- Keeps an open mind.

SAR 'W' family - Helen and John: what we read.

- Helen was in her late 80s when she died whilst being treated for injuries arising from an accident. Helen lived with her son, John.
- John had not summoned any help for Helen but attempted to treat her injuries himself and her wounds had become infected.
- John avoided contact with health services, risk assessments were made on the basis of information gathered 30 years previously. This, plus John's attitude to his GP, led primary and secondary health services to believe that John was 'aggressive' and needed a MHA assessment.

What does a professionally curious practitioner do?

- seeks out the **knowledge or information** that will help to understand the situation.
- tests out their initial hypothesis and **does not make assumptions** (confirmation bias).
- **triangulates information** from different sources to gain a better understanding of the individual or family situation.
- gets an **understanding** of the history of the person or family, hears the **story**, looks at **cumulative risk**, what has worked in the past, why now?

Two important concepts in adult safeguarding

- **Respectful uncertainty**, the capacity to explore and understand what is happening rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value, applying critical evaluation to any information received and maintaining an open mind. By acquiring an open minded, inquiring and curious mind-set, professionals can avoid linear and absolute explanations by exploring alternative, multiple perspectives on a situation.
- **Safe uncertainty**, you do not know everything, you cannot (and should not!) eradicate all risk. But do not take your eye off the reason for the referral and what needs to be the focus (usually basic needs).



Why be professionally curious?




Professional curiosity makes it less likely to make these assumptions.

- Lifestyle choice.
- Normalisation.
- Focusing on the motivation of referrers.
- Thinking other professionals know best - “professional deference”.
- Rule of optimism.

Minimises Biases

Using professional curiosity helps to minimise bias:

- Confirmation bias
- Hindsight bias.
- “Othering”.
- Unconscious bias.



How can we tackle our own unconscious bias(es)?

- Be kind to yourself, everyone has biases, it is how your brain works.
- Notice your biases, take time to think about your actions and decisions.
- Find out more about people you may have a bias toward.
- Be conscious of what sense your brain is making of things in the media/social media.

Other “case dynamics”

- Knowing but not knowing
- Disguised compliance

Disguised compliance: What to do?

- focus on the needs, voice and 'lived experience' of the person
- avoid being encouraged to focus extensively on the needs and presentation of the carers – whether aggressive argumentative or apparently compliant.
- think carefully about the 'engagement' of the adult or carers and the impact of this behaviour on the practitioners view of risk. Is anything actually changing?
- focus on changes in the family dynamic and the impact this will have on the life and well-being of the person – this is a more reliable measure than the agreement of adults or carers in a plan.
- there is some evidence that an empathetic approach by professionals may result in an increased level of trust and a more open family response leading to greater disclosure by adults

Remember Safe Uncertainty

- practitioners need to build close partnership style relationships with families whilst being constantly aware of the person's needs and the degree to which they are met (remember safe uncertainty)
- **BUT**
- there is no magic way of spotting disguised compliance other than the discrepancy between a carer's account and observations of the needs and the accounts of the person. **The person must always take precedent.**



What gets in the way of people using professional curiosity?

What gets in the way?

- Being unhappy. Feeling stressed. Worried about creating further work
- Afraid of the answer, not knowing how to respond or what to do next.
- Afraid or nervous of the person's reaction, they may be angry or threatening or very fragile.
- Needing the reassurance of certainty.
- Poor support or supervision.
- Workloads or workflow, cases are closed quickly, no consistent practitioner.
- Recording processes.
- Defensive or blame orientated cultures.
- The organisation relies on certain 'rules of thumb' to determine intervention.
- Respect for article 8 of the Human Rights Act without reference to articles 2 and 3.

SAR Sam and Ben: what we see.

- Sam died at the age of 91 from natural causes. A SAR was commissioned because of concerns about Sam being neglected by his son, Ben, and because of the unusual circumstances following his death. Ben's body was found a year after his father's death, the cause of his death could not be ascertained.
- New facts came to light after both men died from family members. Was this a case of a troubled man struggling with caring for his Dad with little support, or something more sinister?

What else do we need to do to support our development ?

- Legal Literacy
- Making relationships – listening and empathy
- Understanding trauma
- Difficult conversations

Resources

If you are a manager

- Thacker et al (2020) *Professional Curiosity in Safeguarding Adults: A Strategic Briefing*. Research in Practice Dartington.
- For everyone
- Helen Thacker, Ann Anka and Bridget Penhale (2019) 'Could curiosity save lives? An exploration into the value of employing professional curiosity and partnership work in safeguarding adults under the Care Act 2014' *The Journal of Adult Protection* VOL. 21 NO. 5 2019, pp. 252-267



SARs

- May
- <https://www.herefordshiresafeguardingboards.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SAR-MAY.pdf>
- Helen and John
- <https://somensetsafeguardingadults.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Safeguarding-Adults-Review-Executive-Summary-Family-W.pdf>
- Ben and Sam
- <https://www.rsab.org.uk/downloads/download/17/safeguarding-adult-review-july-2012-the-painter-and-his-son>